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Paul Andrews' Sunday Technology column: Gadget gift tips for the techno-adventurous

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By Paul Andrews
Seattle Union Record

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No matter how dismally technology stocks fare this holiday season, technology toys stand to do better than ever.

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They range from the affordable to the extravagant, from the sensible to the frivolous. We've come a long way from the days of utilitarian mouse holders and keyboard dusters for the family wonk.

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On the other hand, a Fresh-Breath Tester (\$39) or Ionic Clothes Freshener (\$49) may send the wrong signal to even the geekiest gift candidate on your list (www.sharperimage.com).

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Caveats aside, it has never been easier to find something for a technophile. Technology has become so ingrained in contemporary culture, just about every gift category has some computerized component.

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With that in mind, I've selfishly put together a rundown of gifts I'd like to twist Santa's arm for. They're mostly wishful thinking, of course. But from my fantasies, perhaps useful suggestions for others may spring.

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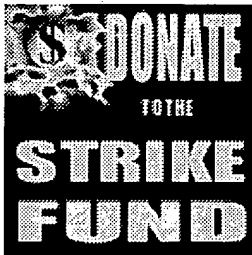
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Name that tune

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Consider this little gizmo: the Sony e-Marker. About the size of a rabbit's foot, it can be configured to identify a catchy but nameless tune on the radio.

You press a button; the e-Marker records the station and time. When you upload the data to www.eMarker.com, you are told the name of the song, the artist, on which CD it appears and how to order the disc.



The \$29 gadget is aimed at teenagers, but aging rockers with fading gray matter may find just as much utility in it. mean, who can keep up with all the bands any more?

The teen in all of us also could have a lot of fun with Compaq's new portable MP2800 projector, recent winner of a "Best of Fall Comdex" award. Hook it into a DVD player or other digital source, find a white (or relatively reflective) wall, and presto! Big-screen TV on any reflective surface.

Conceivably, you could get a drive-in effect by projecting the image on the side of your house and inviting the neighbors. At \$5,000, the projector's cost might mandate charging admission, however.

An inveterate bicyclist, I admit to being mystified over the scooter craze. Growing up in Rainier Beach, I recall having one of these things with soft fat rubber tires and a flared steel platform when I was in, oh, fourth grade or so. Once I got a bike from my grandpa (for Christmas one year), it was all over for the scooter.

Nevertheless, if a current model were to be forced on me, I'd suggest the Razor Extreme (\$129), with a front shock for my time-worn joints and a rear wheelie bar for resting the back foot. There's even a fender to minimize rooster-tailing during those all-too-frequent winter cloudbursts.

Roaming through cell choices

I'm often asked which cell phone to buy. It's a complex question, based not so much on the unit itself as on the network provider. For the user who rarely moves outside a service area, Sprint's PCS service offers clear reception and a variety of smart-phone features.

Most of its phones will provide Internet service, but browsing and e-mail are still a painful experience on a tiny monochromatic screen.

Sprint's Touchpoint TP2200 has a nice speakerphone feature, handy for on-the-go phone conferencing. It works better than you might suspect. The phone suppresses a lot of background noise and is plenty loud even at freeway speeds.

The Touchpoint (\$199) also has a handy speech-recognition system. You train it by speaking a phrase three times. After that, I found the system worked almost flawlessly in recognizing standard commands. You can even set up the phone to activate speech recognition – e.g., dial someone simply by your saying the number – automatically. Hands-free operation at its best.

The teenager in your family – or in you – also will love Sprint's new Samsung Uproar (\$369), a phone with an MP3 music player. You can listen to an hour's worth of tunes and not worry about missing a call: The phone alerts you to incoming calls. You can download songs via a USB cable from your PC or store tunes on www.sprintpcs.com/mymusic for playing off the Web in streaming audio form.

Sprint may win the prize for feature innovation, but where it falls down, unfortunately, is in coverage. For the traveler or outdoors lover who needs signals in a variety of regions and topography, AT&T's network is far superior.

The phone giant's Nokia models are reliable and powerful at sucking in a signal. AT&T's best rate is \$59 a month for 450 minutes of unlimited calling nationwide.

If you want to spread the wireless around, Nextel has a nice offer for a couple or family going wireless: two phones for the price of one. But here's something to think about. If your shopping list includes both a scooter and a phone, Verizon is offering a free Razor with the purchase (\$59) and activation (\$19) of a Nokia 5185i. There are some strings attached, so read the fine print carefully. But the deal is worth a look for sure.

Headsets for comfortable phoning

If I did not have one already, I would definitely be angling for an earset or headset for my wireless phones. Plantronics has several versatile models, starting at just \$19. These are indispensable for extended conversations, when a wireless phone can get uncomfortably hot, and for hands-free operation while driving.

Although the jury is still out on radiation exposure, the earsets help quell exposure concerns. The Plantronics units offer good noise suppression, even with the car window open.

But try one on before settling on a unit, because fit varies. Jabra offers some nice ear-insert models in three sizes and multiple colors. Computer stores (CompUSA) and Magnolia Hi-Fi (www.magnoliahi-fi.com) offer a range of models.

By the way, if you do not have a cordless phone with a headset jack, it is definitely worth investigating a new model. Running \$60 to \$110, most cordless phones now feature jacks and handset clips for strolling the home while talking.

Plantronics makes a tiny earset-only cordless model, the

CT-10, for \$129 list, but I've seen them for under \$100.

Among the most useful gadgets in my wireless arsenal are Motorola's TalkAbout FRS radios. My 3-year-old models are pretty primitive, however, compared to the new T6320 (\$169 each). Not only are these dynamos more ergonomically shaped, they boast a whopping 532 channel configurations, a 10-channel weather radio, altimeter, barometer and digital compass. If you do get lost, at least you have some functions to keep you occupied until the search crew arrives.

Seriously, walkie-talkies come in real handy for keeping track of spouses or family members on shopping trips, when you're meeting at a crowded spot and need to make connections, or on group hiking, mountain-biking or other outdoor expeditions.

They're rated up to two miles, but in actual practice the range varies widely depending on electromagnetic interference, terrain, battery life and other factors. You can find cheaper models for less than \$100 a set (look for units with at least 12 channels).

Network your home computers

Another cool wireless addition to our household would be a home-network option. We connect our five computers via Ethernet cable. But for homes where whacking through walls or running lots of wire among rooms would be disruptive, home networks are coming of age.

Apple started the craze with its Airport configuration for iMacs and G3s. Intel and Proxim offer configurations for PCs as well. But do some investigating about range (150 feet is standard) and speed. A typical network is going to set you back at least a couple of hundred dollars, and you may not be interested at all unless you have a high-speed Internet connection to your home.

Speaking of Apple, any Macintosh user would lust after Apple's new cordless mouse (\$49). Microsoft and Logitech offer cordless models for Windows computers, but the Mac version has the iMac-like translucent shell and an almost erotic feel to the palm.

While you're at it, throw in a new G4 Cube (\$1,800) Mac and flat-panel monitor (\$999). If your pocketbook cannot take that kind of hit, however, iMacs now start at a parsimonious \$799.

More power to hand-held PCs

Which hand-held PDA (personal digital assistant) is the fairest of them all? Over the past year, I've played with most of the current models, including Palms, PocketPCs, Sony's Clie and the Handspring Visor. All except the PocketPC feature Palm's simple and dependable operating system.

For reliability and simple daybook-type features, I like the Palm-based units. They're lighter, uncomplicated, easy to learn and to use. They're also pretty cheap, starting at about \$130.

For the Palm owner on your list, a leather case (\$29), screen protector (\$19 to \$24), foldable keyboard (\$99) or wireless modem from OmniSky (\$99 after rebate and excluding access fees for the Palm V or Vx models) would be just the right touch.

If Palms and related units have a drawback, it is that they are unexciting, at this stage of PDA evolution. Giving a Palm for Christmas is akin to giving a pair of socks. If you're angling more toward a new set of golf clubs, check out the Compaq, Casio or Hewlett-Packard PocketPCs.

Color screens, MP3 music players, dynamic photo displays, wireless capability, voice recording – PocketPCs explode with features and capability. You pay a slight penalty in reliability: Windows CE does lock up occasionally.

The units also are heavier, bulkier and more expensive, in the \$400 to \$500 range. But PocketPCs clearly have the future built in. Wireless Internet technology, awkward on most other hand-held devices, really shines on the PocketPC (assuming a good connection). Even streaming video looks good. Palm's color IIIC model, by contrast, lacks wireless capability and does not display even still color photographs very well.

Perhaps the PocketPC's primary drawback is availability. Vendors have promised healthier supplies, but not until after the holidays. A gift certificate may be in order, depending on your and your intended's patience.

Digital camera advances

Digital imaging is still a great way to celebrate Christmas and kick off a new year. I've had great luck with my Olympus digital ("filmless") camera, a now slightly outdated C-2000. It has taken loads of outdoor abuse without a trip to the shop and shoots at a respectable 2.1 megapixels. Nikon and Kodak make other top-rated models. The current Olympus C-2500 lists at \$1,599 but I've seen it at just under \$1,000.

As far as digital camcorders go, my preference is the new Canon Elura2MC miniDV, a powerful unit in a small package that retails at \$1,599 but is selectively discounted to \$1,350. Canon's ZR-10, a more budget-conscious (\$899) but still versatile unit, has gotten rave reviews as well.

Sony's line of digital cameras and camcorders also is worth investigating, especially if you otherwise rely on Sony "memory-stick" technology or use a Sony Vaio notebook with IEEE ports.

Sony's DSC-F505V still camera shoots at a photo-quality, eye-popping 3.34 megapixel resolution, but the unit is somewhat bulky.

Sony's new Mavica MVC-CD1000 uses 3-inch minidisks, permitting a hefty 160 images at 2.1 megapixel resolution (1,080 at VGA resolution) and quick transfer to a PC. But the camera is not yet widely available, costs \$1,300 and is a bit on the chunky side.

Think global, buy local

Now to address the age-old question: What kind of new computer makes the ideal gift? The Seattle area is blessed with a variety of great PC and Apple outlets. Good places to check include Best Computers (BCI, at www.bcicomputers.com) on the north end of Lake Union and Hard Drives Northwest (www.hdnw.com) in Bellevue for PCs. For Macintoshes, try Westwind Computing (www.westwind.com) near the north end of Green Lake and The Computer Store (www.thecomputerstore.com) in the University District.

My rule of thumb in computer purchasing is Think Globally, Shop Locally. Local merchants offer the best support, from my experience, and will usually try their best to match offers from direct marketers and franchise outlets. Take the Dell or Gateway ad in with you and ask for comparable systems; you should wind up with a competitive quote.

By the way, for comparative pricing in a variety of gift categories, MSN's eShop (www.msn.com) offers fast and thorough rundowns. Even if you do not purchase online, the service is a great way to get an idea of unit availability and price range. Other sites to check out are www.sharperimage.com, www.cameraworld.com and www.outpost.com.

Got a technology question? Gift-related or not, Paul Andrews will try to help. He can be reached at

paul@paulandrews.com or pandrewscom@hotmail.com.

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SEATTLE UNION RECORD
2900 Eastlake Ave E., Suite 220, Seattle, WA 98102

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